







The Making of Ellor-gāst

1985 — 1986



A Cautionary Tale

by

Shirley Jones



Ellor-gāst

the book, consists of eight aquatints by Shirley Jones, illustrating eight passages from Beowulf, translated, set & printed by her, on paper handmade by Jacques Brejoux. With the title page & postscript, there are ten etchings, the colours mainly limited to the dark green & red of the text, printed in 18-& 12-pt Baskerville type. The edition size is limited to forty.



The paper was the starting point for *Ellor-gāst* and was almost my undoing.

I had fallen in love with it at Moulin du Verger, three years before I came to make the book, and it was with great reluctance that I had rejected it as unsuitable for either of the books that came in between. When I began the translations in the summer of '85, I was aware that I was deliberately choosing a subject that would suit that paper.

I had tried various etching techniques on the samples begged from its maker, Jacques Brejoux, and knew that it worked beautifully for almost everything except mezzotint. I had checked with Monsieur Brejoux that it was suitable for letterpress, and convinced myself that the less than perfect results in my own trials were due to lack of care on my part and that a few old printers' tricks would soon solve those problems.

I went ahead and ordered the paper to my own size and specification. I arranged for it to be delivered, when it was ready, to Fontainbleau, where my husband could collect it, when he was there on business in the autumn. My poor long-suffering husband!

Unwittingly, Jacques Brejoux had filled in a T5 Customs' Form, and at Calais my husband's smart blue Saab was imperiously directed into the lorry drivers' lane for boarding the ferry. Protesting that he had only a parcel of etching paper, and offering to show them did not interest the French Customs' officials, only the T5 form which designated his vehicle 'Commercial'. It seemed too that his ticket was no longer valid. His new one cost £80.

He cursed French bureaucracy privately but held his peace until he could explain everything to the sensible English Customs at Dover. Several hours after the boat had docked at Dover he was still trying to show sympathetic but adamant officers what a harmless pile of paper he had in the back there. The price of the paper didn't help. They were incredulous that 500 sheets of paper could cost 9,500 francs, anyway, so desperately my husband resorted to subterfuge. Perhaps it was a misprint? Perhaps it should read 950 francs! But with true Gallic deference to form, Monsieur Brejoux had written 'Neuf mille cinq cents francs'. By hand. In quintuplicate.

By now he was something of a cause célèbre amongst his lorry driving mates, who helped him by-pass some of the lengthier queues and advised him to seek out an agent to help him translate the volumes of jargon-filled papers he'd been given to fill in.

He spent eight dreary hours in Dover Docks that wet November Saturday, paid out £125 in duty and £40 in agent's fees, and at

no time did anyone even want the parcel opened. He could have been smuggling heroin, diamonds or a Pakistani midget, but in fact no one doubted that what that box contained was etching paper. The terrible leper's bell my husband carried was a T₅ French Customs' label.

So much for obtaining the paper. In the weeks that followed, the irritation faded — at least it did for me, vicarious irritation fading faster, after all! And Jacques Brejoux honourably reduced the bill when he heard the story. As for the proofs I was at last able to take, on the long awaited paper, they were everything I had hoped for. I had, in working the copperplates, chosen images and techniques that work well with that paper: strong, figurative images relying on tone rather than colour, with cross-hatching and coarse aquatint to complement the rough surface and fibrous texture of the paper. I carried on making the

plates, excitedly finding fresh ways of making medium and material work beautifully together.

Then, at last ,the plates were all finished and ready for editioning, and I turned my attention to the printing of the text, the setting of which had already been decided. I set and printed the Old English first, in 12-pt Baskerville, because I thought printing in red might be trickier. Only the fibres caused any real problems, and care in drying the soaked paper to the exact degree of dryness solved most of those. I went ahead and editioned all the Old English text, using a heavy sheet of acetate behind each sheet of paper I printed, to counteract the softness of the paper.

My first inkling that all was not going to be well was when I began to print the introduction in 18-pt italic in dark green ink. It was hideously uneven. I decided that the paper was too rough in texture and too heavy for italic, and having no strong feelings about the introduction being in italic anyway, reset it in Baskerville roman. It was still very uneven, in spite of all the tricks I resorted to. I appealed to Ian Mortimer for advice, and after listening patiently to my description of the paper, its weight, my press, what I had tried, he advised me to change either my paper or my press.

I was devastated. But I knew that Ian's advice was sound. You cannot, with a Vandercook proofing press, apply the kind of direct pressure that you can with an Albion. What was happening, was that the rollers of my Vandercook were jumping happily across the troughs in the paper, and lingering lovingly on the bumps. The result is easy to imagine. Add to this the sneaky nature of those fibres, which lay incognito while I carefully scanned each sheet, prior to printing, and then sprang irrepressibly up in pursuit of the rollers as I

actually printed and you have a fair definition of a printer's nightmare. The choice was, to let them be and have a few letters that looked smudged, or tweak them out and leave bald patches.

I considered the various alternatives. I would not use another paper for the etchings; it had, after all, been the raison d'être for those particular images. I considered printing the text on different paper, reconciling myself to re-setting and printing all that Old English. Its highly distinctive tone proved impossible to match, anyway, and introducing another colour too distracting in what I had conceived as a bound book. I knew that the weight and texture of the paper were the main problems. I realised I could ask Jacques Brejoux to make me a lighter weight, hot-pressed paper for the text — but what a delay! "Look," said my friend and colleague, Denise Lubett, in her business-like, French way - and without a trace of partisan spirit—"Phone Jacques Brejoux; you know the French can sometimes work miracles." I did, and yes, he could make me the paper I wanted. What was more, he could do it in just over a week, if drying conditions were favourable, and it was spring by now. Unfortunately he was leaving for a three week trip to Florida, the following day!

I resigned myself to waiting but continued to worry at the problem. I remembered the remark of another friendly colleague: "If only you could flatten out the bumps!" And I thought of my etching press. I discovered that by running each soaked and blotter-dried sheet through the rollers, with a sheet of copper on the bed of the press, the paper printed rather well. It had the effect though, of pushing all the bumps through to the back of the paper, so that I had to put it through the etching press again to flatten the reverse side before printing, re-damping in between. In

all this entailed two thousand runs through the etching press before the paper was even ready to put through the Vandercook!

I felt quite triumphant at having cracked it and even succeeded in printing the colophon in italic, but I never quite got the better of those fibres. The etching press helped, so did the right degree of dampness, so did infinite care but there were some occasions . . . My failure rate has never been higher.

There is a foot-note to all this. The Old English word *ellor-gāst* means a spirit from elsewhere, hence a monster, and as I explained in the introduction to the book, my translations and my images were an attempt to capture the *ellor-gāst* in *Beowulf*. In its making I seem to have unleashed a few too!

Before publishing, I sent a rough copy of this account to Jacques Brejoux, observing that as his paper was the star — and sometimes the villain — of my story he might like to write a few lines about how it was made. It would be interesting to print this along with an etching on the same paper. He declined: "l'histoire de la fabrication du papier est connue de tous et un peu insipide". He wrote me instead this tongue in cheek letter, which I have translated — with a little help from my friends!

Dear Madam,

about your adventures & those of your husband. It's really cruel of me since I get off scot-free even though I am the prime cause of your misfortunes. I find your revenge very subtle: I would never have thought in all my activities as a paper-maker that I could have set in motion such a chain of events that would result in this epic publication. So you surely didn't intend - at least I hope you didn't - to punish me by asking for these few lines. Yet you should know dear lady that it is only because I'm a failed writer that I turned paper maker. Unable to make my mark on paper, I decided to produce it while waiting for something to say.

This has been going on for fifteen years now & it is still more pleasurable to me to paddle in pulp, concocting formulae, gazing lovingly at virgin pages, than to agonise over the stringing together of three intelligible words. The battle is lost in advance. I am definitely a paper-maker. I console myself over your revenge by thinking of the fresh problems & trouble that printing this page will cost you. But I am not too cruel: it will cost you no more than that.

Cordially yours,





